

RESEARCHUPDATE

BUTLER CENTER FOR RESEARCH JANUARY 2002

Youth Violence and Alcohol/Drug Abuse

Although homicides committed by youth have dropped since the early 1990s, arrests and self-reports for other violent behaviors are on the rise.¹ In 1999, five million youth aged 12 to 17 reported serious fights with others at school or work and almost two million youth reported attacking others with the intent to harm.²

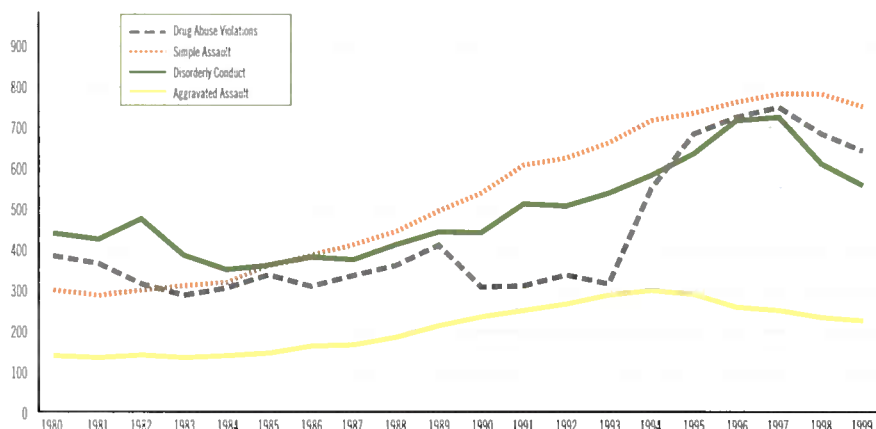
Often, violence and substance abuse occur together. As drug abuse violations have increased in recent years, so too have arrests for assault and disorderly conduct (see Figure 1).¹ Several studies have examined the relationship between substance abuse and violence and developing effective prevention programs has become a priority.

Violent Behavior

According to a recent National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA), adolescents who used alcohol in the month prior to the survey were significantly more likely to have behaved violently in the previous year.³ Youth ages 12-17 were divided into groups based on their alcohol use patterns in the past month: heavy drinkers drank five or more drinks per occasion on five or more days, binge drinking was defined as five or more drinks on one to five occasions, and light drinking was defined as one-four drinks on any occasion. As shown in Figure 2, heavy drinkers were much more likely than binge or light drinkers to report destroying property and threatening or physically attacking others. Non-drinkers were the least likely to engage in these behaviors.

Drinking levels are associated with severe criminal behavior, as well. Heavy- and binge-drinking youth were significantly more likely to report shoplifting, drunken driving, drug trafficking, and having been arrested or booked for legal violations at least once in their lifetimes compared to non-drinking peers.³

Figure 1:
Arrests per 100,000 people ages 10-17 per year



SOURCE: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000.¹

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THE HAZELDEN EXPERIENCE

Hazelden's Publishing and Educational Services division produces prevention modules for use in schools. *No Bullying* and *Respect & Protect* are programs designed to provide staff and students with the skills to recognize, address, and prevent potentially violent situations. *Project Northland*, developed by Cheryl Perry, Ph.D. and Carolyn Williams, Ph.D., is a skills-based program that aims to delay the age of first alcohol use, reduce consumption among those already drinking, and limit alcohol-related problems.

CONTROVERSIES & QUESTIONS

Question: Are substance abuse and victimization related?

Answer: A survey of over 11,000 youth ages 11-17 found significant correlations between alcohol and drug abuse, risky behavior (i.e. walking alone at night) and victimization.⁵ Illicit drug abuse, combined with risky behavior, was associated with victimization among females. Among eighth-grade boys, risky behavior and alcohol abuse was associated with victimization.

HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

- **Parents:** If your teenager is having difficulties with substance abuse and violent behavior, remember that substance abuse treatment can help. The longer your teen is engaged in treatment, the better the outcome in reducing violent behavior and substance abuse.
- **Educators:** Support the implementation of effective, empirically-based violence and substance abuse prevention programs in your school.
- **Treatment Providers:** Work to keep young people engaged in the alcohol/drug treatment process. Longer treatment stays and using structured skills-based approaches effectively reduce violence among youth.

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The NHSDA also found significant differences among drinking groups in terms of violence directed toward the self. Heavy- and binge-drinking youth were twice as likely to think about killing themselves and three times more likely to try to hurt or kill themselves compared to non-drinking peers.³

Handguns and Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is also associated with the possession of firearms. Youths who used illegal drugs in the year prior to the NHSDA survey were three times more likely to have carried a handgun than youth who did not use drugs. Binge-drinking and heavy alcohol use were also highly associated with handgun possession, with youth being four and five times more likely, respectively, to have carried a handgun in the past year compared to non-drinking peers.⁴

Which Comes First: Violence or Substance Abuse?

Violent behavior appears to be both a risk factor for and a consequence of alcohol and drug abuse in this population. Aggression and impulsivity in young children is predictive of later chemical abuse in adolescence.^{5,7} Conversely, studies have shown that substance use decreases inhibitions and self-control, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of violent behavior.^{8,9}

Preventing Violence among Youth

Treatment for substance dependence decreases violent and criminal behavior among youth. According to a large-scale study conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the number of 11-18 year-olds engaging in criminal activities dropped from 75.6% to 52.8% in the year following treatment.¹⁰ The more time spent in treatment, the greater the improvements. Specifically, youth who stayed in treatment at least 90 days, whether residential or outpatient, were 1.45 times less likely to be arrested in the year following treatment compared to peers with shorter treatment stays.

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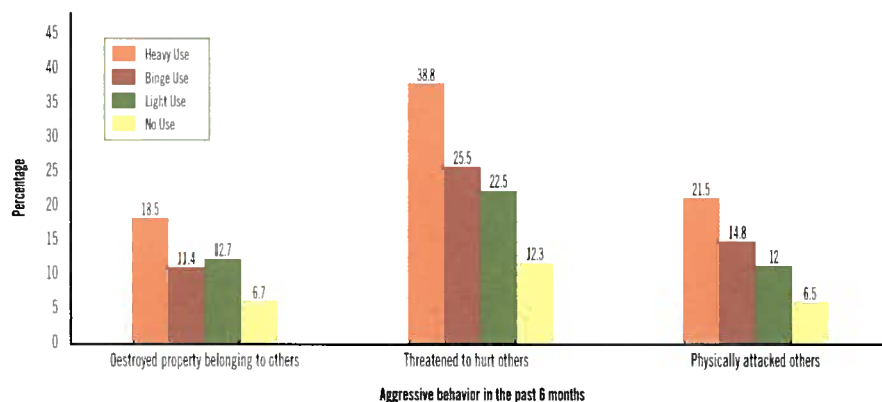
A comprehensive review prepared by the office of the U.S. Surgeon General found that the most effective violence prevention programs for youth are multi-modal, behavioral, and include social, moral reasoning, and thinking skills training.¹¹ Such programs significantly reduce the number of re-offenses, the level of substance abuse, and aggressive behaviors among youth. School participation, achievement, and avoidance of individuals with antisocial tendencies also work to inhibit the development of later behavior problems and substance use among aggressive boys.¹²

Summary

Although violence and chemical abuse commonly co-occur, it is important to remember that not all youth who use substances act violently and not all violent youth use substances. Nonetheless, the association between violence and chemical abuse warrants specific and effective interventions for this population. Youth who struggle with both substance use and violent behaviors can be helped and effectively treated.

Figure 2:

Percentage of 12–17 year-olds reporting aggression by last-month alcohol use pattern.



SOURCE: Greenblatt, 20003

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The Butler Center for Research informs and improves recovery services and produces research that benefits the field of addiction treatment. We are dedicated to conducting clinical research, collaborating with external researchers, and communicating scientific findings.

Patricia Owen, Ph.D., Director

If you have questions, or would like to request copies of Research Update, please call 800-257-7800 ext. 4405, email butlerresearch@hazelden.org, or write BC 4, P.O. Box 11, Center City, MN 55012-0011.

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